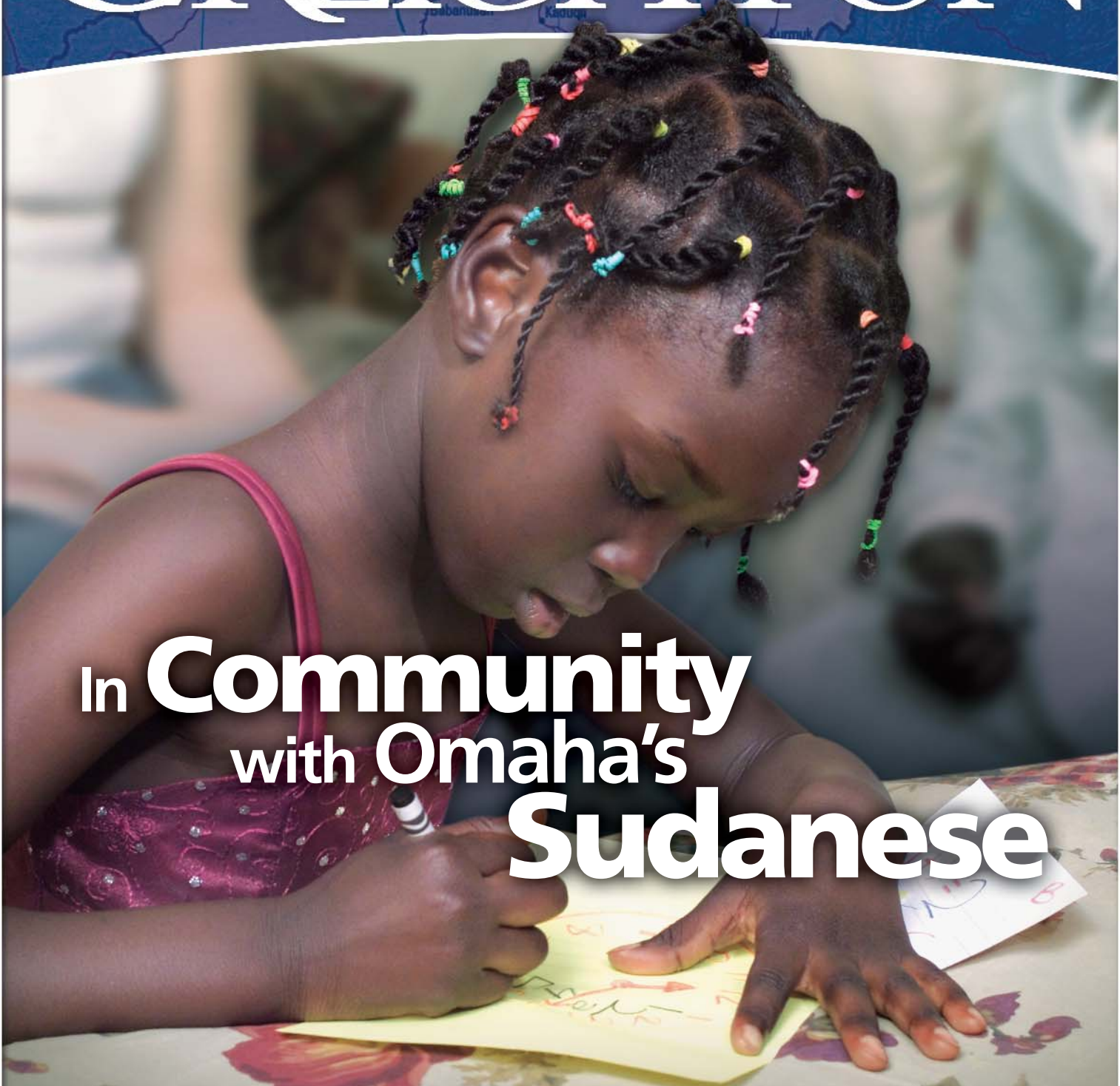


U n i v e r s i t y M a g a z i n e

# CREIGHTON



In **Community**  
with Omaha's  
**Sudanese**

Creighton at 125:  
Student Life

A Second Opinion,  
from "Dr. Darwin"

Weighing In On the  
Food Pyramid

Spring 2004



Creighton professor Joan Mueller, OSF, Ph.D., at far right, meets with some of her "extended family members" — refugees from the Sudan — after Mass at Omaha's Immaculate Conception Church.



# In Community Omaha's

*Creighton Program Assists Struggling Refugees*



The quiet aftermath of an early fall Sunday Mass vanished as two infants protested the cool water trickling down their foreheads. Their mothers quickly soothed their cries, dabbed them with a towel and welcomed them, newly baptized, into the Catholic community.

The children, of course, had no idea how far they had traveled to that baptismal font at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in South Omaha, nor how much they owed their tenuous grip on an American life to Project Welcome, an outreach effort led by a quiet-spoken but tenacious nun named Joan Mueller, professor of theology at Creighton University.

The infants represent the first generation of American-born Sudanese, born here of refugee families fleeing civil war in their native Sudan.

Thanks to Project Welcome their older siblings receive math, language and reading instruction in the basement of Immaculate Conception, their parents have been offered dental and legal assistance by various Creighton departments, and Creighton student-volunteers have stepped forward to help in ways ranging from supplying clothes and diapers to teaching cooking classes and tutoring preschoolers.

In a Project Welcome summer math camp, professional teachers from area Catholic schools tutored Sudanese children falling behind in math. Mueller said all camp participants raised their math competence a grade and a half in a single week.

"The goal is to stop the cycle of poverty before it starts," Mueller said. "If we can get these children through

high school and college, we will stop the cycle of poverty."

It all helps, said Isaac Lam, who, together with his wife, Hagar Helou, fled Sudan and now is raising his family in South Omaha and is working at First Data Resources.

"There is security here," he said. "No one will die. We are safe. But there are difficulties."

Lam, like all the Sudanese refugees at that fall Sunday Mass, held himself with dignity, and spoke quietly of where he has come from. He also relates how Project Welcome is helping him and his fellow immigrants get a firmer footing in a country that can seem bewildering.

Joblessness, and appeals from family members still trapped in Sudan who think their relatives now walk sidewalks paved with gold, plague these newest immigrants. Like so many newcomers before them, however, they occupy the very bottom rung of American life, live in the poorest places, and hold low-paying jobs, trying however they can to get by.

It was a Sudanese initiative — creation of a community food pantry — that led Mueller to their cause. When a newspaper published a photo of the pantry, newly formed in 2002, Mueller recognized, quite literally, an answer to her prayers.

Mueller had taught theology at Creighton for nine years by November 2002 and was seeking additional responsibilities. In that photo she recognized a people in need, and recognized also a response to her prayers asking how she might put her energy to greater use.

One week later, she attended a meeting of Sudanese community leaders, politely declined their immediate offer to name her president of the board, and began instead to identify their needs.

"They had no food, no diapers, no formula, people were homeless, some couldn't pay their rents, many of the children were failing in school," Mueller said. "The situation was like a huge onion that had many layers. I understood there could be no Band-Aid, no immediate magic answer."

But if no magicians were to be found, well then at least there were Creighton's dental clinics, the Milton R. Abrahams Legal Clinic, the Center for Service and

# with Sudanese

By Eugene Curtin

Justice, and others — professors, teachers and students at Creighton who might rally to the cause if asked.

And Mueller was willing to ask.

"Sister Joan called one day and said she had a problem and could we help," said James H. Howard, D.D.S., associate dean for clinical services and director of clinics at Creighton's School of Dentistry.

Howard learned that it is a coming-of-age ritual among some Sudanese to extract the six lower teeth between the canines. Howard visited Immaculate Conception and inspected 10 to 12 adults, all of whom had those teeth missing. Howard concluded they could be helped, and scheduled appointments with Creighton student-dentists.

The Sudanese came once, but were never seen again.

That was a puzzling experience for Howard, who oversees the work of dozens of student dentists in a teeming gym-like space on Creighton's campus. He had seen the free dental treatment as an opportunity for the University to help a needy group of immigrants while also providing his students with

Abrahams Legal Clinic, director Kate Mahern, J.D., and her team of approximately eight law students have had success helping Sudanese refugees hold onto their rented homes, sometimes taking landlords to court when they are deemed to be providing substandard housing.

The volunteer hours  
graciously given by  
these seminarians and  
the Catholic school  
teachers are critical to  
assisting the struggling  
refugee population.

— Joan Mueller

the poorest living circumstances, and it is in that realm where the toughest landlords are found.

"The Sudanese have the fewest choices, and so typically end up with the worst landlords," Mahern said. "But we can negotiate on their behalf. Even if we can't win a case, we can negotiate a better situation."

Mueller said the legal clinic has been stalwart in its support of the refugees.

"The clinic has saved thousands of dollars from predatory landlords who wanted to take advantage of poor people," she said.

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ROSE DANCES, prances really, through the rows of chairs in the dimly lit basement at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church. A statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus stands mutely in a corner. Rose is one of about 25 Sudanese children who have just finished singing "The Farmer in the Dell," as well as enjoying a story-time session in which the reader informed them, as generations of children before them had been informed, that "there once was a



Creighton students Megan Rasmussen and Joanie Koneck-Wilcox make Rice Krispies treats with sisters Mary, Rose and Night John, as pictured from left in the first photo.

valuable experience.

"What we thought was going to be a true success story has kind of gotten bogged down," Howard said.

Howard said he suspects that the missing teeth are not viewed as a serious problem by the Sudanese, regarded perhaps as a small matter compared to the many other challenges they face. Nevertheless, he said, the offer remains open, and some Sudanese have availed themselves of Creighton's free services for other dental problems.

Over at Creighton's Milton R.

Mahern said it is obvious to her that Sudanese refugees underestimate their legal rights. She said she and her staff have intervened successfully for Sudanese who fall behind in their rents, sometimes devising repayment schedules, sometimes persuading landlords that a court would probably look unkindly on the quality of accommodations provided.

The Sudanese refugees, like generations of newcomers before them, find their choices limited, she said. Low-paying jobs mean they can afford only

lady who swallowed a fly."

Before this Project Welcome session ends, Rose and her peers will have practiced their cursive, their math and their English. Project Welcome instructors include local Catholic school teachers, as well as seminarians enrolled in Creighton's Institute for Priestly Formation and enlisted in the Sudanese cause by the ever-present Mueller.

The children on this particular warm July afternoon are working with their seminarian tutors — Eugene Hickey, Gregg Loughney, Kevin Zilverberg and

Photos by Mark Romesser



Brian Clarke. The children, preschoolers through 10th-graders, work patiently on their assignments and eagerly gather around for story time.

When the children are safely gathered into a van to be driven home, and order has been restored to the church basement, Mueller and the seminarians retire to the back room that doubles as the Sudanese food pantry, sit around a rickety table and talk things over.

The volunteer hours graciously given by these seminarians and the Catholic school teachers are critical to assisting the struggling refugee population, Mueller said.

"The (Sudanese) women are overwhelmed," she said. "The parents are just so stressed. People are in danger of losing their housing, the children don't have appropriate clothing. There's a lot of need."

Students at the Creighton School of Medicine also responded eagerly to a plea for help. Among those who responded was Siobahn Bower, who now tutors two Sudanese children twice a week.

Begoa and Quiet are 5 and 6 years old, respectively, and are sister and brother. On Sunday and Wednesday evenings they meet with Bower, who is a first-year medical student at Creighton and a native Californian.

"When I first spoke to Sister Joan she said she was concerned that Begoa and Quiet were falling behind and (asked if I could) help them with their English," Bower said. "I've been doing that, and I think the children are really appreciative. They get excited when I come now, which is good because working with kids just has the hugest importance. If they can get on track now they'll be on track throughout school."

Bower recently joined other medical school students who helped the Younkers department store relocate merchandise from one location to another at Westroads Mall. The move took place from 8 p.m. on a Saturday to 5 a.m. Sunday. The money paid to the students, which totaled \$1,300, was used to help pay the debt Sudanese families incur in immigrating to the U.S.

It is efforts like those of the Creighton medical students that Mueller hopes will spread, and eventually help the children of the Sudanese to assimilate and advance in American society.

Most of the parents of the children served by Project Welcome expressed an expectation that their children will opt to stay in America, though they were less certain about their own futures, given the pull of home and the demands of needy family members stranded in Sudan.

Lam said his brother fled to Beirut, Lebanon, and was jailed for a form of vagrancy even though he has been officially classified as a refugee. The brother has no way to support his family and constantly appeals to Lam for aid. Lam said he must try to help.

"I have no choice," he said. "In Beirut there are no jobs for foreigners, so I try to support my brother's family by sending money."

James Gouk, another member of South Omaha's Catholic Sudanese community, said Lam's difficulties are



Photo by Mark Romesser

Creighton medical student Siobahn Bower tutors Begoa (left) and Quiet Chol, two Sudanese children, at their Omaha home.

When the Cold War ended a door creaked open for refugees across the world.

It opened slowly and cautiously, over more than a 10-year period, but in the fall of 2001 a strong wind gave it a big push.

Following Congressional hearings in the spring of 2001, in which traumatic testimony described atrocities and human rights abuses in Sudan, the U.S. Department of State refocused its

of Sudanese had been plunged into slavery, that southern Sudan's 5 million people had no access to schools or health care, and that the government "routinely" bombed civilian targets such as hospitals, schools, relief centers and marketplaces in an effort to crush opposition.

A U.S. State Department document emerged from those hearings. Titled "Overview of U.S. Refugee Policy," the document was published in October 2001

It is a difficult transition, made all the more difficult by the debt refugees incur traveling to America, and by the impossibility of landing a well-paying job in a country so different from the one they left. While the U.S. government pays the cost of bringing the refugees to the United States, it requires repayment. The average Sudanese immigrant family, according to Mueller, arrives in America in debt to Uncle Sam in an amount

## Sudanese Flee Three Decades of War



longstanding refugee policy. No longer would its lens concentrate so closely on the persecuted residents of nations formerly under the thumb of the Soviet Union. From now on, the world's many victims of war, religious intolerance and persecution based on race, political opinion or nationality would get priority.

The decision was a lifesaver for thousands of Sudanese, who became a primary target of U.S. resettlement efforts.

There was good reason for that decision.

Roger Winter, executive director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees, a private, non-profit advocacy organization, was one of the chief testifiers before Congress in the spring of 2001. Torn by civil war for 18 years between the Muslim north and the Christian and animist south, and embroiled in war of one kind or another for 34 of the 45 years since it won independence from Great Britain, Sudan had become the most miserable place in the world, Winter said.

His indictments were many. He estimated that more than 3 million Sudanese had died as a result of war and government policy, that tens of thousands

and cited many of the charges laid out during the Congressional hearings in the spring.

The document, while observing that most countries in sub-Saharan Africa enjoy religious freedom and peaceful coexistence, noted that Sudan is a stark exception where "the government has conducted or tolerated attacks on civilians, indiscriminate bombing raids, and slave raids in the south, all with a religious as well as an ethnic dimension."

Consequently, cities across America began accepting Sudanese refugees. There are the "Lost Boys of Sudan," orphaned youths who found their way to Tampa, Fla., Reno, Nev., Pittsburgh and many other communities across America. There are families settling by the thousands in San Diego, Nashville, Tenn., and small counties throughout Iowa. And thousands have settled in Nebraska, making the state among the largest centers of Sudanese immigration in the United States.

According to Sister Joan Mueller, who founded Creighton University's Project Welcome, the greater Omaha area has between 7,000 and 9,000 Sudanese immigrants.

between \$2,000 and \$4,000. Their ability to repay that debt is hampered by a three-month wait before they receive the Social Security numbers that permit them to seek work. In the interim, they depend upon refugee organizations to help them secure housing.

When they do land a job, it is almost always in the \$6- to \$8-an-hour range, forcing them to settle for housing that Mueller said can be substandard accommodations at premium rents. Five hundred dollars or \$600 a month for homes that sit just this side of condemnation is not unusual, she said.

The experience of two immigrant Sudanese families is instructive, Mueller said. Housed on the upper and lower floors of an apartment building, the families repeatedly complained to the landlord about plumbing problems, she said. No action was taken until a bathroom ceiling caved in on a 7-year-old child brushing his teeth. Thankfully, the child escaped serious injury. The apartment was immediately condemned by city inspectors.

"Housing can be dismal for these refugees," she said. "But they have hope for a better future."



common among the Sudanese, even though many have too little money to support their own families, let alone the families of relatives back home.

Gouk assembles window blinds for a living, and believes he could not get by without Project Welcome.

"I try to send money home, but the income from my job isn't enough for my own family," he said. "Sometimes we run out of diapers or food, and Sister Joan will go and beg people to give us diapers and milk."

Mueller believes that if people know of a legitimate need that they will respond. She points to the students at Creighton Prep High School who donated large amounts of food to the Sudanese Food Pantry after their annual Operation Others food drive. Mueller recalls driving several van-loads of food from the distribution center to the food pantry, a donation that was welcomed by her and the hard-pressed Sudanese recipients.

Though Mueller is clearly tenacious in acquiring the basics for the Sudanese refugees, she said Project Welcome is not intended to become a permanent welfare system. The Sudanese, she said, have landed in a rewarding though difficult country and will prosper over the long term.

"For some, it's as though they have been dragged from a medieval society and dropped into the 21st century," she said. "It is a brutal culture shock."

Among the first things Mueller said Project Welcome sought to provide the Sudanese was employment assistance. They needed, she said, to find jobs, the lowest paying jobs if necessary, but something that would get their feet on the economic ladder.

Resumé clinics were conducted, in which the refugees listed every skill that might prove useful. Job hunts were conducted, jobs found, and the long process begun of planting roots and building stability. Stability is key for these refugees, Mueller said, because children prosper when housing, education and families are stable.

Most onerously, she said, they are responsible for repaying the U.S. government the cost of their flight to the United States, a heavy burden weighing



Photo by Dave Weaver

Mueller takes a group of Sudanese women on a tour of the Joslyn Art Museum. At left is Rebecca Nyang and at right is Mary Deng.

on average about \$2,000 to \$4,000 per family. Project Welcome has raised almost \$30,000 to help families with these debts. A woman mailed Mueller a \$1,000 check with a touching note saying that she had no children, unlike Sister Joan who she had learned suddenly had many. This check was similarly used to retire travel debt.

Step by step, however, the refugees see things improve, Mueller said, and as they sense a growing stability, they respond better to American culture.

"For the most part, once they have some sort of safety net, someone to talk to, their ability to enculturate improves," Mueller said. "They attend school meetings, they buy car insurance, they manage their money more efficiently."

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It has been little more than a year since Mueller first noticed that photo in a newspaper and began peeling back the enculturation onion, layer by layer. She said the work, while progressing, is

only a beginning. Project Welcome needs to expand to serve a larger portion of the Omaha Sudanese refugee population, she said.

She said she has been encouraged by the keen response from the Creighton community, as well as the Archdiocese of Omaha.

"Without Creighton, and the support of Archbishop Elden Curtiss, without the people who have written checks and donated their time and talents, we could have done none of this," she said.

"Everything is done through volunteers and donations. We are simply a neighbor-helping-neighbor ministry."

All in all, it's peeling that onion back one layer at a time.

"Step by step, day by day, it happens." ☺

*About the author: Eugene Curtin is a freelance writer living in Omaha.*